

Extensions of Remarks
By Rep. Frank R. Wolf
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Ecuador Trip Report

MR. WOLF. Mr. Speaker, I want to share with my colleagues a report on my recent trip to Ecuador. I traveled to that South American country January 9-15. I spent two days in the rain forest, one day traveling in country, and two days in Quito, the capital. With the spread of populations and industry into the Amazon Basin, tribal groups are having to come to grips with the realities of 21st century life and I was asked to visit in order to better understand those challenges.

The world was stunned 43 years ago, in January of 1956, when the speared bodies of five young men, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint and Roger Youderian, were discovered in the Curaray River of southeastern Ecuador. These were evangelical missionaries from three different missions, who, in their attempt to make meaningful contact with the Auca tribe, had been murdered. Aucas (the Spanish word for "savage") had a long history of killing outsiders, friendly or not. In their desire to make contact, these young men—from age 28 to 32—had known the risk. The response to their deaths was broad and immediate, as other young men and women followed in their steps, led by a wife and a sister of two the men who had died. As a result of the continued contacts, most of the tribal members stopped their killing within two years of that incident, and for the most part they have lived peacefully since.

A few months ago, however, the son of one of the original five men, Steve Saint, contacted my office regarding some of his humanitarian concerns for the people in this tribe, now called in their native language, the Huaorani. As a result, I journeyed with a friend to the Ecuadorian rain forest and also Quito, the capital, between Saturday, January 9, and Friday, January 15, for the purpose of meeting the people, becoming acquainted with the region, and assessing whether I could be of any assistance by understanding the particulars of their situation.

The challenges of tribal life in the Amazon Basin, particularly with the inroads of industry, are not small and have been well documented by sociologists, anthropologists, and others. This huge area of rain forest, which is home to as few as 175,000 people in various tribal groups scattered throughout it, has received much attention from the scientific, industrial and religious communities.

Upon arrival at Quito airport Saturday evening, we were met by Peter Harding, political officer at our embassy, and Alicia Duran-Ballen, daughter of a former president

of Ecuador. She acted as host and interpreter for us while we were in Quito. We left the next morning early by private plane for Nemompade, a very small village in the Amazon Basin, 160 miles southeast of Quito, a few miles from the site on the Curaray where the young men had been killed. We were met there by Steve Saint and spent the next two days and nights with the Huaorani learning how they lived, being shown their ways, and talking with them about their concerns for the future.

Generally, we observed their way of life, their culture and their interactions with each other and learned what it is like to live on a day to day basis in the rain forest. A group of high school students from Wheaton Academy, a private school in the Chicago suburbs, were there at the same time.

The challenges facing the Huaorani are not on the same order as other groups which I have visited and for which I have expressed great concern previously. However, they are faced with learning to live interactively with hi-tech civilization in the coming years, and learning to do so while maintaining their own identity. Historically, they have been a highly egalitarian group, without much vertical social order. That has been moderated some in the last 40 years to include community elders, who help guide life in the tribe. They have also become somewhat less nomadic in recent years.

Government requirements for personal registration, voting at designated venues which may be several days away by jungle trail, and other things necessary to interact with the national culture are matters which are currently under discussion with the Ministry of Government in Quito, and more specifically the Office for Indigenous Affairs. As hunter-gatherers in the rain forest, the national language, use of money, and means of transportation all critical to engagement with the outside world are foreign to the Huaorani and all need to be addressed. Additionally, the request for a radio frequency from the government by which to communicate and educate within the tribal region was in process.

Steve Saint's approach has been to understand that the people in this region will continue to interact more and more with interests outside their local environment. The question is not "When will this process happen?", but "with whom and can they survive it as a tribal group?" The people feel that they need to learn to be both independent and interdependent within the national culture, avoiding the pitfalls of becoming welfare recipients. To assist them in that journey, he has invited groups—such as the Wheaton Academy students---to visit for a few days in the rain forest at a neutral site constructed like a village, not an actual settlement. In that manner, the visitors can interact with the Huaorani without interrupting village life. Each person pays a fee and the profits are put into an account in the nearest large town in the names of the village elders. In that way, the Indians are creating a productive economy which they can control.

Additionally, health-care skills are being practiced to improve their health without having to journey outside their territory. A simple, but ingenious, form of dentistry is in place so that they can fill teeth, again without journeying long distances. Although

sickness does not seem to be prevalent, except diseases that might be “brought” from the outside, the Huaorani do have significant problems with decaying teeth. Much of this malady, apparently, stems from their eating staple—maniocroots. Manioc is a starch that converts to sugar readily, hence, tooth problems abound. I use this illustration only to highlight the fact that every effort is being made to help them be self-sufficient on their own terms and with their own resources.

Transportation is another significant factor as relates to commerce and health-care. Although rivers abound in the rainforest, in this area their serpentine characteristic prohibits speed in travel. We traveled 40 minutes by dugout canoe and ended up 100 yards from where we began. The rule of thumb is “one minute in the air is two hours on a jungle trail.” Therefore, an attempt is being made to procure an accommodation in the regulations to allow for a plane in the tribe and a “designated pilot.”

When we returned to Quito, we were able to spend time with our ambassador, Leslie Alexander, and his colleague, Peter Harding. We discussed the nature of our visit and other topics of mutual concern and interest. The following day we visited the persons responsible for the Office of Indigenous Affairs and articulated why we had come to Ecuador and what we had seen. They were grateful for the interest and assured us that they would marshal whatever resources at their disposal to address the issues raised.

We then had the opportunity for a good discussion with the president of Ecuador, Mahuad, joined by Ambassador Alexander. Not only were we able to discuss the situation of the Huaorani, we were also able to invite the president to the National Prayer Breakfast, which he subsequently attended on February 4.

In the words of Steve Saint, what the Huaorani need are the following:

1. The right to vote and establish their citizenship within their own territory, which would include a place to register their birth, marriage and death, and to acquire the “cedulas” (identity cards) that are required of all citizens.
2. The right to develop their own means of disseminating information throughout their own territory, in their own language, without meeting stringent communication requirements that were established for densely populated territories. They need favorable concession in the acquisition or radio frequencies.

Although much of my interest has focused over the years on the violation of human rights around the world, it was encouraging to see a situation in which thoughtful assistance in a timely way could nurture self-determination and the democratic process. I am grateful for the efforts of our Foreign Service Corps in Ecuador for their skill and dedication in the public sector, as well as the work of private U.S. citizens in the humanitarian arena, which enhances the lives of peoples in both countries.